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Audience of the Holy Father with the Roman Curia on the occasion of the presentation of Christmas wishes

This morning, in the Hall of Benediction of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the Cardinals and superiors of the Roman Curia for the presentation of Christmas wishes.

During the meeting, the Pope delivered the following address:

Address of the Holy Father

“Bless and do not curse”

Dear brothers and sisters!

My deep thanks go to Cardinal Re for his greeting and good wishes. How good to see that he does not age! Thank you, Your Eminence, for your example of readiness to serve and your love for the Church.

Cardinal Re spoke about the war. Yesterday the [Latin] Patriarch [of Jerusalem] was not allowed into Gaza, as had been promised; and yesterday children were bombed. This is cruelty. This is not war. I wanted to tell you this because it touches my heart. Thank you for having referred to this, Your Eminence, thank you!

The title of this address is *“Bless and do not curse”*.

The Roman Curia is made up of many working communities, more or less complex or numerous. This year, in thinking about a reflection that could benefit community life in the Curia and its various offices, I chose an aspect that fits in well with the mystery of the Incarnation, and you will immediately see why.

I thought about *speaking well of others and not speaking ill of them*. This is something that concerns all of us,

including the Pope – bishops, priests, consecrated persons and the laity. In this regard, we are all equal. Why? Because it is part of our being human.

Speaking well and not speaking ill is an expression of *humility*, and humility is the hallmark of the Incarnation and particularly the mystery of the Lord's Birth which we are about to celebrate. An ecclesial community lives in joyful and fraternal harmony to the extent that its members walk in the way of humility, refusing to think and speak ill of one another.

Saint Paul, writing to the community in Rome, says, "Bless and do not curse" (*Rom* 12:14). We can also understand his words as meaning: "Speak well and do not speak ill" of others, in our case, our co-workers, our superiors and colleagues, everyone. Speak well and do not speak ill.

The path to humility: self-accusation

I would suggest today, as I did some twenty years ago at a diocesan assembly in Buenos Aires, that all of us, as a way of exercising humility, learn the practice of *self-accusation*, as taught by the ancient spiritual masters, particularly Dorotheus of Gaza. Yes, Gaza, the very place that is presently synonymous with death and destruction, is a quite ancient city, where monasteries and outstanding saints and teachers flourished in the first centuries of Christianity. Dorotheus was one of them. In the footsteps of great Fathers like Basil and Evagrius, he built up the Church by his writings and his letters, which abound in evangelical wisdom. Today too, by reflecting on his teachings, we can learn humility through self-accusation, so as not to speak ill of our neighbour. Sometimes, in everyday speech, when someone makes a critical comment, another will think: "Look who's talking!". That is in everyday speech.

In one of his "Instructions", Dorotheus says, "When some evil befalls a humble man, he immediately looks inward and judges that he has deserved it. Nor does he allow himself to reproach or blame others. He simply puts up with this hardship, without making a fuss, without anguish, and in all tranquility. Humility troubles neither him nor anyone else" (Dorotheus of Gaza, *Oeuvres spirituelles*, Paris 1963, No. 30).

And again: "Do not try to know the faults of your neighbour or harbour suspicions against him. If our own malice gives rise to such suspicions, try to turn them into good thoughts" (*ibid.*, No. 187).

Self-accusation is only a means, yet one that is essential. It is the basis for our being able to say "no" to individualism and "yes" to the ecclesial spirit of community. Those who practise the virtue of self-accusation and do so consistently are gradually liberated from suspicion and distrust, and make room for God, who alone can bond hearts. If everyone makes progress along this path, a community can be born and grow, one in which all are guardians of one another and walk together in humility and charity. When we see a defect in someone, we should only talk about it with three others: with God, with the person in question, or, if that is not possible, with the person in the community who can take care of the situation. No one else.

What is the basis of this spiritual "style" of self-accusation? It is *inner abasement*, in imitation of the *synkatábasis* or "condescension" of the Word of God. A humble heart abases itself, like the heart of Jesus, whom in these days we contemplate lying in a manger.

Faced with the tragedy of a world so often in the grip of evil, what does God do? Does he rise up in all his righteousness and hurl condemnations from on high? In some sense, that is what the prophets expected, even to the time of John the Baptist. Yet God is God; his thoughts are not our thoughts, and his ways are not our ways (cf. *Is* 55:8). God's holiness, as divine, is paradoxical in our eyes. The Most High chooses to abase himself, to become little, like a mustard seed, like a man's seed in a woman's womb. Invisible. In this way, he begins to take upon himself the enormous, unbearable burden of the world's sin.

God's condescension is mirrored by our practice of self-accusation, which is not primarily a moral act of our own, but a *theological* reality – as is always the case in the Christian life. It is a gift from God, the work of the Holy

Spirit, which it is up to us to accept, to “condescend” and be willing to welcome this gift into our hearts. That is what the Virgin Mary did. She had no cause for self-accusation, yet she freely chose to cooperate fully in God’s condescension, in the abasement of the Son and in the descent of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, *humility* could well be called a *theological* virtue.

To help us abase ourselves, we can go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This will help us. Each of us can ask: when was the last time I went to confession?

En passant, I would like to mention something further. A few times I have spoken about gossip. This is an evil that destroys social life, makes people’s hearts sick and leads to nothing. People say it very well: “Gossip is pointless”. Be careful about this.

Blessed ourselves, let us bless others in turn

Dear brothers and sisters, the *Incarnation of the Word* shows us that God has not condemned us but *blessed* us. What is more, it reveals to us that in God there is no condemnation, but only and always blessing.

Here we can think of certain passages of the Letters of Saint Catherine of Siena, such as this: “It seems that [God] desires not to remember our offences, or to condemn us to eternal damnation, but to show us constant mercy” (*Letters*, No. 15). And we need to talk about mercy!

Yet above all we can think of Saint Paul and the magnificent first words of the hymn found at the beginning of the Letter to the Ephesians:

“Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (1:3).

Here we find the origin of our ability to “bless” others: precisely because we ourselves have *been blessed*, we can *bless* others in turn. We have been blessed, so we can bless others.

All of us need to plunge into the depths of this mystery; otherwise we risk drying up and becoming like those empty, desiccated canals that no longer contain even a drop of water. Here in the Curia, office work is itself often arid and, in the long run, can make us dry unless we refresh ourselves through pastoral work, moments of encounter, friendships, in a spirit of openness and generosity. With regard to pastoral experiences, I ask young people especially if they have any pastoral experience, this is very important. For this to happen, we need, more than anything else, to make the Spiritual Exercises each year: to immerse ourselves in God’s grace, to be totally immersed in and drenched by the Holy Spirit in those floods of life-giving water whereby each of us has been willed and loved “from the beginning”. If our hearts are embraced by that primordial blessing, then we will be able to bless everyone, even those for whom we do not care or those who have treated us badly. This is the case: we are to bless even those who are unfriendly.

The model to which we should look is, as always, the Virgin Mary, our Mother. Mary is, par excellence, the one who is *Blessed*. That is how Elizabeth greets her at the Visitation: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (*Lk* 1:42). That is how we too address her in the “Hail Mary”. Our Lady brought us the “spiritual blessing in Christ” (cf. *Eph* 1:3) that was certainly present “in the heavens” before all time, but also, “in the fullness of time”, present on earth, in human history, when the Incarnate Word became man (cf. *Gal* 4:4). Christ is that blessing. He is the fruit that blesses the womb; the Son who blesses the Mother. The Virgin Mary can rightly be addressed, in Dante’s words, as “the daughter of your Son... humble and lofty more than a creature”. Mary, as Blessed, brought to the world the Blessing that is Jesus. There is a painting, which I have in my study, of the *synkatábasis*. There is Our Lady with her hands like a small ladder, and the Child is descending the ladder. The Child has the Law in one hand and with the other he is holding onto his mother so as not to fall. That is Our Lady’s role: to carry the Child. And this is what she does in our hearts.

Artisans of blessing

Sisters and brothers, as we look to Mary, image and model of the Church, we are led to reflect on the ecclesial dimension of this blessing. Here I would summarize it in this way: in the *Church, sign and instrument of God's blessing for humanity*, all of us are called to become *artisans of blessing*. Not just those who give blessings, but artisans who teach, living as artisans to bless others.

We can think of the Church as a great river that branches off into a thousand and one streams, torrents, rivulets – a bit like the Amazon basin – to water the entire earth with God's blessing, flowing from the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

The Church thus appears to us as the fulfilment of the plan that God revealed to Abraham from the moment he first called him to leave the land of his fathers. The Lord said to him, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you... and in you shall all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (*Gen 12:2-3*). This plan dominates the entire economy of God's covenant with his people, a people "chosen" not in an exclusive sense, but in the sense that we, as Catholics, would call "sacramental". In a word, by bringing the gift of that blessing to everyone through our example, our witness, our generosity and our forbearance.

In the mystery of the Incarnation, then, God has blessed every man and woman who comes into this world, not with a decree that rains down from heaven, but through the flesh of Jesus, the blessed Lamb born of blessed Mary (cf. Saint Anselm, *Or.* 52).

I like to think of the Roman Curia as a great workshop in which there are any number of different jobs, but where everyone works for the same purpose: to bless others, and to spread the blessing of God and Mother Church in the world.

Here I think in particular of the hidden work carried out by the office staff – the *minutanti*, some of whom I see here, they are very good, thank you! – who prepare letters assuring someone who is ill or imprisoned, a mother, father or child, an elderly person, and so many others, that the Pope is praying for them and that he sends his blessing. Thank you for this, because I sign these letters. Is that not to serve as an artisan of blessing? *Minutanti* are real artisans of blessing. They tell me that a saintly priest who worked years ago in the Secretariat of State had attached to the back of the door of his office a piece of paper that read: "My work is humble, humbled and humiliating". Perhaps this was a negative way of seeing things, but not without a grain of truth and healthy realism. To me, it can be read in a positive way, as conveying the typical style of the "artisans" of the Curia: humility as a means of spreading "blessings". It is the way of God himself, who in Jesus condescends to share in our human condition, and thus gives us his blessing. And I can testify to this: on my recent Encyclical, on the Sacred Heart, which Cardinal Re mentioned, how many people worked! Very many! The drafts went back and forth... Many of them, with small things.

Dear friends, it is reassuring to think that through our daily work, especially that which is hidden, each of us can help bring God's blessing into the world. Yet in this, we must be consistent: we cannot write blessings and then go on to ruin them by speaking ill of our brother or sister. So this is my wish: may the Lord, born for us in humility, help us always to be women and men of *blessing*.

A happy Christmas to all!
